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ABSTRACT

It is not enough to encourage parents to be involved in schools and centers for young children through the usual spoken and written ways. By providing places for parents, schools and centers can extend invitations and dramatically demonstrate their expectations. Providing a welcoming entryway that allows three-way observation among parents, children, and staff is especially important in difficult circumstances (i.e., when either parents or staff suspect maltreatment of children or when the purpose of a child's enrollment includes therapeutic goals). The entryway (or another space if the entryway is not suitable) may become a sharing space for parents if it contains a bulletin board and books and brochures at adult height. Other physical arrangements to include parents might be a chalkboard with daily announcements outside the classroom door, family photos by each child's cubby, a bench in the outside area, or tea and coffee available in the kitchen area. Parents can also be involved in the center or school through activities during regular hours or at meetings. (A final checklist summarizes main points in this discussion and can be used by staff and parents in assessing the need for and quality of parent places in schools and centers for young children). (CB)

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MAKING AND MANAGING PLACES FOR PARENTS IN SCHOOLS/CENTERS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: A Planning and Evaluation Guide

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MAKING AND MANAGING PLACES FOR PARENTS IN SCHOOLS/CENTERS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: A Planning and Evaluation Guide

by
Patricia Smith Ranzoni

Centers for young children speak to parents as certainly as they speak to the children who attend and as clearly as if they had voices of their own. They speak through the messages they give about the place of parents in their programs, messages conveyed not only by the ways staff communicate in their brochures, newsletters, meetings, telephone and person to person contacts, but how they demonstrate the importance of parents by planning places and designing spaces that say, "Welcome! We need each other. Let's help each other do the best job possible of caring for and teaching our children. Welcome!"

It is not enough to encourage parents in the usual spoken and written ways. Here, the adage what we do speaks louder than what we say applies. The absence of designated parent places can negate good intentions no matter how frequently or sincerely repeated. By their places for parents, or lack of, schools and centers extend invitations or erect barriers and demonstrate expectations dramatically.

Places where parents can become visible participants are characteristic of schools/centers where that key triad, PARENT: CHILD: STAFF is born and nurtured. It is the quality of this developing relationship that forms the foundation of the experience for all three, the merging of goals and needs, and support to meet those goals and needs.

Other rationale for maintaining parent places have to do with what happens there. The traditional entry or coat area where parents deliver and staff welcome children provides the

important function of transition for parents, children, and staff in an act of trust. It is here in this small space and time at the beginning and end of the day that samples of behavior and patterns of interactions can be observed: parents and children, staff and children, parents and staff, children with peers, and parents with theirs, staff with each other, and all with the physical setting. In this way, if properly set up to facilitate these dynamics, the entry area can provide a piece of truth: space and time where all three principals can check each other and the center out. Here, too, parents, children, and staff can model their needs by teaching others what to expect from them. These functions have both introductory and ongoing evaluative implications.

Places where transitions, trust, truth, and teaching can happen between parents, children, and taachers (as all caregivers of young children are) are escential to the development of all three. Consider the giant steps that are taken by parents, their children, and guardians/guiders in the act of a child being left at a school or center, whether child care home, day care center, nursery school or primary school. What is usually a first step away from home for a growing child and a first letting go for parents, (developmental milestones unsurpassed in significance in the parenting process) deserves a place of security and emotional safety. Here, important lessons of childhood and parenting will be learned. Likewise, the commitment that is made by the staff to each child and its family deserves a place to be demonstrated and acknowledged.

The importance of the three-way observation opportunity and teaching functions of places where parents, children, and staff meet cannot be overestimated in difficult circumstances when either parents or staff suspect maltreatment of children, or when the purpose of a child's enrollment includes therapeutic goals.

To ensure that the home-to-center gap is bridged, a

necessary precedent to the achievement of other center objectives, staff should critically and constructively assess the messages their places convey vis a vis the role of parents. Ultimately, the place given to parents will be determined by the overall program philosophy and the staffs' perspectives about the relationship of parents to the program. Whether publicly or privately sponsored, profit or non-profit, parents and children need and deserve assurance that their family will be strengthened and supported rather than divided and weakened by their child's attendance.

In addition to cooperatives which depend on full parent participation, there are schools and centers which model the parents as part of the team premise: what improves the quality of life for families will improve the quality of life for children, and what improves the quality of life for children will improve the quality of life for families. Often unspoken is the fact that what improves the quality of life for the children who attend a school or center, and their families, improves the quality of the experience for staff and contributes to the growth of the program as a good place to invest oneself. Beneficial outcomes result for all when parent places are provided.

Applying the concept of wholeness or wholism that has been popularized during the past several decades, the whole center, if you will, will embrace parents whenever they can visit. These schools/centers will typically integrate places for parents throughout the inside and outside facilities--a kettle for tea in the kitchen, a bench in the play yard. Parents who choose such a center are oriented early to its routines and organization, including guidance on their behavior while there, e.g. safety rules and how to stay at the childrens' level. At such places, parents are seen coming and going in a manner that is smooth and comfortable for all. Staff seem secure in their presence and welcome the benefits of having parents around.

Other examples of schools /centers where the place of parents is integrated throughout are indicators such as exhibits on fences or posters at adult level in the learning centers which list their goals for the children. The Head Start centers in the two-county area in which I have consulted do this routinely and thereby extend the learning potential of each area.

One of the most successful ways I used for engaging parents and children immediately upon their arrival, during my years as a principal and school director, was to keep a small chalkboard outside by the door with daily messages for parents to read to and with their children, sharing the day's potential from the beginning. Simple seasonal words such as "See the sun!" or hints about something to look for or do, such as "Something is in the box", "Look on the table", or "Someone will come" on the day of a dancer's visit, provide immediate anticipation and assurance to both parents and children that something interesting is to be found within (or without). Such a small investment of space and money becomes an exciting tool in the transition and teaching process. Language development will be recognized as another desirable outcome of the morning message board.

When a place for parents is included in the entry, standard ingredients are a bulletin board for news of center and community interest, book shelves with resources on parenting and child development for lending, an assortment of free brochures and fact sheets on such topics as nutrition, social services, toy safety, things to do and find out about. Narrow tract dispensers similar to those found in church vestibules can be built to fit specific areas or mounted on doors that are left open.

The space above child level is, of course, most likely to be available for use as parent space since floor space is at a premium in most facilities and should be reserved for use

by children. Wall, cupboard, closet or shelf space at adult level provides a variety of room. Where these are unavailable, or in addition, consider a special basket or bag designated for parents and hung from a hook under a shelf or beam. Such a container could hold any number of materials of interest to parents and could be fun for both parents and children if the children have their own tote bags on their coat hooks. In the event that busy parents do not stop to check parent places of these kinds, a clothesline by the door with a pin for each family provides an easy pick up system for announcements, brochures, newsletters, etc., and a visible check of which families got the message. Something the staff wants everyone to receive goes here, not left to a chance pile. Encourage parents to share in the same way by making copying available. Don't forget to share poems and light anecdotes that celebrate childhood, parenting, and teaching, and which encourage the expression of thoughts and feelings, both humorous and serious.

There will be places for parents as well as children to hang their coats and store belongings. Family photos by each child's cubby or hook say, "This is our place". Such photos contribute to a family atmosphere and sense of community which carries over into school activities between parents, children, and staff. Such signs of family become increasingly important the younger the child and the longer the day. Further, they provide the staff with a reference point from which to teach the "all kinds of families" concept so important in the support of families that have undergone change from illness, death, divorce, or those of minority cultures. Sometimes a child's school or center and the contacts parents make there provide the only continuity to families experiencing cultural alienation, social isolation, or other crises threatening their stability.

Most centers assume a degree of advocacy and routinely pass along information about issues and legislation of importance to children and families through the awareness functions made possible in parent places. For example, the Hilltop Day Care Center in Bangor, Maine, obtained and displayed an

approved car seat to help educate parents on the implementation of the recently enacted Child Safety Law.

One of the most effective uses of entry wall space I have seen was at New Alderbrook School, a nursery and kindergarten program in Bucksport, Maine. Being the first nursery school in that community, the staff made an extraordinary effort to involve parents and help parents understand the importance of the experience. At an evening parent meeting, the staff had markers, paper, yarns and glue ready and asked each parent to make himself or herself a nametag showing a sign of spring. After wearing their creations during the meeting, they were asked to glue them, collage fashion, onto a large piece of mural paper (mud colored, coincidentally!) on which the words SEE SPRING COME were printed in large letters. The fun shared by parents was surpassed only by the delight of their children when they saw their parents' "work" when they arrived the next morning and found their parents' names. In addition to other obvious outcomes, such an activity provided an opportunity for the children to see first-hand evidence of their parents' involvement and the staff-parent relationship which so often occur out of their view and cannot be conceptualized. What better way to establish a school or center as a parent place?

If space cannot be found in an entry area, sometimes space for sharing can be found in a kitchen, which tends to be a gathering spot if there is a kettle on. A corner, table, or shelf can be provided in the same ways and with the same functions described above. If the kitchen, or any place, is out of the traffic pattern of parents, extra efforts will be necessary to invite them to stop by.

A place that parents do visit regularly, if there is one, is the office, if that is where they pay tuition or have conferences with staff. Again, all of the above possibilities apply. Whereas life safety codes put kitchen off limits to children, a mini play area can be set up in an office so that a child has a place to occupy himself or herself while parents

and staff conduct their business. In this case, the adults should be certain that their conversation is appropriate for the child to hear.

In the file marked "dreams" is the ideal arrangement: space that is not needed by the children that can be designed and maintained specifically for parent use. Such space is most usually found above or below ground floor where children may not be allowed by code, or purpose-built in schools/centers having adequate funding. Such an optimum parent space would be a combination resource and respite area, both a workshop and a resting, socializing and supportive space where parents get and give--to each other in a peer relationship, to the center through projects, and to their own growth and development, especially important when a child's attendance is predicated on therapeutic goals for parents as well as his/her own individual education plan.To address the needs of such parents who tended to resist anything sounding like therapy or parent education, I designed a program called "Friday is My Day" in which parents of children in a therapeutic nursery school at a community mental health center stayed once a week for peer support, to plan and carry out activities to enhance their own strengths and to learn to understand their children and themselves better.

Where transportation or finances are limited, sometimes a child can participate in an early childhood program only if the parent stays. The wise staff sees this as an advantage rather than an inconvenience and finds a place for these parents.

If a program has a parent coordinator, that person can work with parents on an informal needs assessment to determine what they would like to see available. Otherwise, a volunteer might work with the staff to obtain input and commitment from parents. The school's resource file might be consulted to check out nearby colleges where students in education, human development, social work, or related courses of study might welcome the opportunity to work on a parent project for credit.

When parent places are established, the staff should ensure that they are available for use by parents who work away from home during the day as well as being open during the hours when children are in attendance.

Places for parents are vital to home-based programs which provide services to children and families through home teachers and outreach rather than at a center. The Washington County Children's Program in Machias, Maine is a highly respected program that has pioneered in developing resources for families in an economically depressed area. Their headquarters includes a large work/meeting area which is in constant use by both staff and parents. In addition to the usual parent education activities that take place there, parents come together to learn how to do their hair, apply makeup and do other inexpensive things to lift their spirits and self-esteem.

This program and others, like the Infant Development Program at United Cerebral Palsy of Northeastern Maine make sure that the exchange, the teaching, goes both ways--staff to parent and parent to staff. To balance the "We're the experts. Here's what you need to know" messages that may contribute to feelings of inadequacy and guilt among parents, parents are encouraged and expected to share their expertise, strengths and talents. The UCP program designed a peer counseling program which received a grant a year ago and which successfully models parents as resources to each other and the staff, since they are, after all, most knowledgeable about their children and the experience of parenting a special needs child. These programs model the continuum of possibilities for making parent places, including both parent designated spaces and scheduling to make multi-purpose space available for parent use.

Although a tight economy and budget cuts mean bad news to most homes, centers, and schools for young children, straining the resources and energies of staff as they work to esta-

blish priorities and give their best to children; and although it is easy to become discouraged when there is a substantial gap between what one knows is ideal and what there is time, money, and space for, there is good news. Parent places need not be costly either in the fiscal or physical sense. The more the staff works at making the school/center whole, by welcoming parents with places, the more the creativity that those who work with young children are known for can be applied to parents. It means looking at old space in new ways and with an eye to possibilities rather than limitations. It means extending what space is available.

A bulletin board can be tripled in capacity by adding a shelf on top and hooks for bags or baskets along the bottom. Certainly there is ceiling space from which a mobile with messages for parents (pictorial or written) can be hung. A structural column or beam can be covered with cloth to become a parent center-in-the-round for announcements, displays of parent projects or children's work. Even if the center provides infant care, in which case there are no samples of children's work, parents will be reassured to see photographs of the day's routine and their children being cared for comfortably throughout the day. When no storage space can be spared (if it hasn't been used for over a year should it be allowed to take up space?), a hinged, double set of shelves on wheels becomes a portable parent place where projects, books, coffee pot, etc. can be rolled in and out. It is important, in general, that the smaller the space that can be devoted to parents, the more staff works at making the whole center a place where parents are welcome.

The parent who feels unwelcome at the place where his or her children are being cared for should carefully assess the reasons for these feelings. If there are verbal or behavioral messages that directly or indirectly say, "hands off", "time to go", or other turf-guarding signs, parents should discuss

the matter with staff and explore their perspectives. Some staff will be resentful of what they view as overprotective parents who complicate separations and prolong their child's anxieties because of their own needs. To maintain a quality of communications in the spaces shared by parents, children, and staff, both parents and staff should take responsibility for resolving or problem solving around any issues that cause communications to break down. Once it is determined that resistance is not directed specifically at one parent, but a generalized mode of interaction with all parents, then it should be determined if this way of communication (or failure to communicate) is a philosophy in action or lack of resources, time, or motivation, in which case you and other parents can volunteer to arrange and maintain a parent place. Most staff would be grateful for such an offer if it is done sensitively and not as a statement of their inadequacy. Be sure to enlist staff approval and ideas along the way. Then let it be known that this parent place exists and help teach other parents about the possibilities of its use by a special letter home, a "christening" celebration and frequent references to its offerings in newsletters. Don't forget to include invitations for parents to contribute items to share there.

Beverly Shumaker, an early childhood teacher before she became a parent and day care consumer, and who integrates parenting with her present professional role coordinating services for foster children in the greater Bangor area, sums up the perspectives of parents like herself. Having been on both sides of the child care/early childhood program relationship as provider and consumer, she and her husband, Don, shopped carefully. "After all, putting your child in a center is such a big decision. We looked for an attitude and an awareness--an attitude of openness toward and wanting to share with parents and an awareness of parents' need and right to know about and give input to the program. We definitely would rule out programs, and did, on the basis of how the staff seemed to see the place of parents."

The following checklist summarizes the points discussed in this article and is offered as a tool for use by staff and parents in assessing the need for and the quality of parent places in schools and centers for young children. The process of working together on such an important aspect of a program will be as important as the product.

PARENT PLACES:
PLANNING AND EVALUATION WORKSHEET

1. What messages does this school/center convey to parents about their place in the program?
2. Is there a parent place in this school/center, no matter how small? Where?
3. Does it invite parents to participate in a two-way exchange of information and ideas with staff and other parents? How?
4. Does it offer both resources and respite? How?
5. Is is attractive and well organized, changing with events, interests, seasons?
6. Are all parents aware of its possibilities? How do you know?
7. Do most parents use it ? How do you know?
8. Is the quality of interaction there good, fair, or poor? How do you know? How could it be improved?
9. Is it available to parents both while children are in attendance, before, and after?
10. Have parents been asked what they would find helpful in a space for them? How?
11. Have parents helped plan the space? How?
12. Are there displays and materials pertaining to the children's experiences? What?
13. Are there displays and materials pertaining to adults? What?
14. Do parents help evaluate the space? How?
15. Does the parent place enhance the effectiveness of the school/center? How?

16. Does the parent place reflect the values of the predominant culture of the community as well as ethnic minorities? How?

17. Is the parent place geared to fathers as well as mothers? In what ways?

18. Does the parent place celebrate life in the community as well as lift sights beyond to what is happening with children and families elsewhere? How?

19. What do you like about the place(s) for parents in this school/center?

20. What do you think should be changed? Added? Why? How?

21. What are you willing to do to add or improve parent places in your school/center?

22. What are other parents and staff willing to do? (Action plan) When? (Timeline)

NOTES: